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ABSTRACT

This working paper describes the ATFALE project to introduce pedagogical innovation into Moroccan preschools. Following a review of the history of the traditional Muslim Kuttab school for preschool and early elementary school children, the paper discusses the educational reform goals of the ATFALE project. Specifically, the project plans to develop a child-centered concept of preschool education, support new approaches to retraining of teachers, develop methods to make teachers more sensitive to the need for parental involvement in the schools, develop a training methodology that allows teachers to integrate innovative and adequate educational practices, and to stimulate and create more dynamic training facilities. The paper then considers plans for the operational framework and cooperation of the ATFALE and Koranic Preschool Group, the strategy for introducing innovation into Koranic preschools, the evolution of the action-research, and the impact of the project on pedagogical activities and at institutional and administrative levels to date. (JPB)

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Khadija Bouzoubaâ

An innovation in Morocco's Koranic Pre-schools

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About this paper

This paper tells the story of the ATFALE team's work between 1990 and 1995 to introduce pedagogical innovation into the Koranic pre-schools of Morocco. After the introduction of Western approaches into primary schools in Morocco, the traditional Koranic schools or kuttabs that accepted children from four to about 12 years old found that they were catering mostly to the children of the 'popular' neighbourhoods. These institutions had to transform themselves into 'primary schools' able to meet the needs of this group with limited funds. Similarly, the authorities responsible for education in Morocco as well as the traditional educators also had to adapt to this new situation.

The ATFALE project, with support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation and in collaboration with the Ministry of National Education, carried out a process of research-action-training to define and adapt the conditions that would better meet young children's educational needs and take the socio-economic conditions and the cultural norms of their environment into account. The project has involved the different actors concerned with the *kuttabs*. The pedagogic vision of this project has been adopted by the Ministry of National Education, which has since been working on spreading ATFALE's approaches.

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Khadija Bouzoubaâ, is a researcher at the Faculty of Education Sciences, University Mohammed V at Rabat. She has a master in psychology (Paris), a doctorate in education sciences (Nanterre) and a teaching diploma (Saint Cloud). She has been a part of the ATFALE team since its beginning in 1986.

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Khadija Bouzoubaâ

An innovation in Morocco's Koranic Pre-schools

Bernard van Leer Foundation, *May 1998*

AN INNOVATION IN MOROCCO'S KORANIC PRE-SCHOOLS

This paper describes a project that aims to introduce pedagogical innovation into Moroccan pre-schools. The project was developed by ATFALE[1] and the Groupe Koranic Preschool (GKPS – the Koranic Pre-school Group) between 1990 and 1994, and was extended in January 1996 in order to consolidate its experiences. It was conducted by the ATFALE team of four teacher/researchers from the Faculty of Education Sciences of the Mohammed V University, of Rabat in cooperation with a team from GKPS. The GKPS team comprises three primary school inspectors, headed by the director of the Primary Education Directorate of the Ministry of National Education. The project receives support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The project reached educational advisers and teachers from Koranic schools, also known as '*kuttabs*', from seven regional delegations of the Ministry of National Education, all located within a 200 kilometer radius of the city of Rabat.

To go back a few steps, between 1986 and 1989 the ATFALE team piloted an experimental project under the Ministry of Youth and Sports to introduce innovative pedagogy in pre-schools. During this period, the question of which ministry was responsible for pre-schools was being debated between the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Various institutions provide pre-school education in Morocco: modern pre-schools, which depend on support from the private sector or from the social services of various ministries (mainly Ministry of Youth and Sports); *kuttabs* which are academically orientated in urban areas and loosely fall under the control of the Ministry of National Education; and *kuttabs* which are centred on the Koran in rural areas. The rural *kuttabs* are generally managed by village communities, although the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs have a say in their running. The majority of pre-school children in the country are enrolled in these two types of *kuttabs*. Administrative recognition of these institutions is relatively recent.

In contrast, during the period of the French Protectorate in Morocco (1912-1956), the Ministry of Youth and Sports was responsible for the pre-school sector. Although a decree dated 8 April 1941 defined this responsibility, in actual fact, only the fledgling sector of modern, city-based pre-schools fell under its jurisdiction. The Ministry of Youth and Sports' administrative authority over all pre-school children was increasingly being contested by the Ministry of National Education. With its heavier administrative infrastructure, substantially larger network of establishments across the country, and specialisation in the educational field, the Ministry of National Education judged itself in a better position to manage this sector.

1 In Arabic, the acronym ATFALE (Alliance de Travail dans la Formation et l'Action pour l'Enfance) stands for 'children'.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs also had the same claims to rights over early childhood due to the Koranic character of the large majority of institutions attended by pre-school children, in addition to the cultural importance placed on early religious education.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports eventually put an end to this debate by handing over the responsibility of pre-school education to the Ministry of National Education. The role of the Ministry of Religious Affairs was unstated.

Recognising that the large majority of pre-school children attend Koranic *kuttabs*, the ATFALE team[2] realised that if it were to form a partnership to assist disadvantaged youth, the partnership would have to be with the Ministry of National Education which oversees the *kuttabs* in both administration and pedagogy.

Thus in 1989, the ATFALE team proposed an action-research project to the Ministry of National Education aimed at introducing innovative pedagogy in Koranic pre-schools. The proposal was warmly welcomed, since it encouraged an awareness and a renewed interest within these institutions within the Ministry.

What is the history and current set-up of Koranic schools in Morocco? How did our project attempt to adapt the *kuttab's* traditions and curricula to the needs of pre-school children? These are the questions that we will seek to answer by looking at the objectives of our action-research project, its methodology, implementation and results. The paper will also question the cultural and social significance of introducing pedagogical innovation in Koranic schools in present-day Morocco.

General history of the kuttab in Muslim society and in Morocco in particular

The *kuttab* is a type of school for children aged between four and ten in Muslim society that developed in the Arab peninsula in the first centuries of Islam. The model spread during the Umayyad[3] era in the wake of conquering armies, and the *kuttab*[4] system became widespread in Abbasid[5] times. Its structure and teaching methods appear to have been modelled on the Byzantine primary school[6], but its curricula was purely Islamic and Arabic.

The *kuttab* was an important agent for socialising different Muslim ethnic groups into the Islamic faith and way of life. It served as a vehicle for transmitting the values of Islamic society from generation to generation. With its clearly defined goals and methods, it provided a common educational base for the heterogeneous ethnic groups forming Muslim civilisation throughout the world. Until the penetration of Western models in Islamic societies during the 19th century, the *kuttab* was the only vehicle of public instruction for young Muslim children.

Since this form of basic education was religious, the *kuttab* was often connected to a mosque. But the classroom itself could be located in any space available. Specially constructed *kuttabs* were usually erected with support from philanthropists or a *Wakf*[7] (a goodwill foundation that often helped orphans). Since they were originally tied to the notion of goodwill, *kuttabs* often targeted the large powerless and poor segments of the population. The wealthier classes preferred to entrust their children to private tutors.[8]

Kuttabs were not compulsory, and the children who attended were generally enrolled at the age of four and studied for an average of four to five years. Throughout the Muslim world,

2 The team consists of Khalid El Andaloussi (team director), Khadija Bouzoubaâ, Mohammed Faiq, Brigitte El Andaloussi (research coordinator).

3 The Umayyad was the first Islamic dynasty (661-750). One branch founded the kingdom of Spain, with the city of Cordoba as its capital.

4 See 'Kuttab' or 'Kouttab' in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* (1982), Bosworth CE, Van Donzel E, Lewis B, Ch Pe-la TV, Maisonneuve et Larousse, Paris.

5 The Abbasid was the second dynasty that reigned over the Muslim world (750-1258).

6 See Lecomte G (1954) 'L'enseignement primaire à Byzance et le kouttab' in *ARABICA review of Arabic studies* founded by Levi-Provençal, T1. EJ Brill, Leiden. According to the author, schools of the Byzantine empire had the same formal characteristics as *kuttabs*: 'Teaching in *kuttabs* is only "arabic" and Muslim in terms of its contents (...), methodology and curricula. It drew extensively on a base common to all peoples from the western basin of the Mediterranean. Straight after the Conquest, the Arabs borrowed from the Byzantines long-tested teaching techniques.'

the Koran was the main, if not the only, subject taught. It was taught in Arabic, whatever the child's mother tongue.[9]

This general information about *kuttabs* in the Muslim world also applies to Morocco, although a few additional points should be underlined. Basing themselves on the writings of Ibn Khaldoun[10], most authors point out that although additional subjects (grammar, poetry, calligraphy, maths) were added to the curriculum of *kuttabs* in other parts of the Islamic world, in Morocco and Algeria, only the Koran was taught.

The reason for this restricted programme is linked to the country's historic and geographical situation. The threat of interference from within and outside the country likely reinforced the need to preserve the orthodoxy and conformity of the sacred text. The result, according to Ibn Khaldoun, is reflected in the low level of Arabic language proficiency found among people in North Africa.

But mastering Arabic was not the primary goal of rote learning at a very young age. The goal was no less than the shaping of the Muslim personality. Ibn Khaldoun suggests that this system took advantage of children's submissiveness in order to teach them what they would only be able to understand later: 'Only children are capable of learning a text that they don't understand now and will understand later,' he wrote.

Evidence suggests that in both rural and urban areas *kuttabs* have a fairly long tradition. Although it is difficult to precisely estimate their number, Merrouni[11] refers to an estimate given by Paye[12] in which 150,000 children, out of a total of 800,000, attended m'sid (or Koranic school) at the beginning of the century.

The period of the French Protectorate (1912-1956)

Under continuing pressure from the Western model established during the Protectorate, the *kuttab's* structures and programmes could not remain unchanged. There was a dual reaction to colonial domination. On the one hand, Koranic schools served as a bastion of defence for the Muslim and Arabic identity. Islamic schooling was maintained, even reinforced, to fight against attempts at assimilation or negation on the part of the colonial system. But on the other hand, enlightened spirits were quick to understand that at risk of being jeopardised, this type of institution could not be maintained in its traditional form. Their push for basic reforms gave birth to the powerful 'free school'[13] movement. However, this movement was not strong enough to reform all Koranic schools. Free schools were mainly urban institutions attended by children of the bourgeoisie, while *kuttabs* were commonly found in rural areas and poor urban neighbourhoods. There were fewer children enrolled in free schools than in *kuttabs*.

The two teaching systems – namely free schools and Koranic schools – operated independently of each other. One was open to modernising and was ready to introduce reforms but had relatively low enrolment levels, while the second was locked into repeating the same values and traditions but reached a much larger number of children. Writings from this period describing Koranic teaching and learning methods attest to the immobility of *kuttabs*.

***Kuttabs* during the first years of independence**

The duality between the *kuttabs* and schools was to continue and even to be reinforced during the first years of independence. At this time, competition from the modern education system

7. Many children were orphaned by the Islamic conquests.

8. Ennaifer H (1995) *Histoire du kouttab et ses fonctions avant et après l'Islam*, Ibla, Tunis (in Arabic).

9. See 'Kuttab' or 'Kouttab' in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* (1382). Bosworth CE, Van Donzel E, Lewis B, Ch. Pella TV, Maisonneuve et Larousse, Paris.
For the general history of the *kuttab*, also see Arfaoui A (1987) *Le kouttab, l'Islam et l'éducation. Étude socio-historique et pédagogique d'une institution millénaire dite école coranique*. PhD thesis, Paris.

10. Ibn Khaldoun (1332-1406) was known as the 'father of historiography', and he lived in North Africa, Spain and the Middle East. See *Discours sur l'histoire universelle. Al Muqaddima*. New translation, preface and notes by Vincent Monteil (1967/1968), Sindbad, Paris.

11. Merrouni M. (1884) *Le collège musulman de Fès 1914-1956*. PhD Faculty of Education Sciences, University of Montreal.

12. Paye L (1957) *Enseignement et société musulmane. Introduction et évolution de l'enseignement moderne au Maroc*, thesis, Sorbonne University, Paris.

13. The emphasis was put on Arabic-Muslim culture but new disciplines such as language, maths, history, geography were studied using methods from schools. In contrast to the multi-grade *kuttabs*, classes were organised by age group. Exams to pass from one grade to the next were introduced. Those who reached the end of the cycle could continue their studies at the Université Qaraouiyine in Fès.

became even stronger. At last freed from the yoke of colonial domination, the Moroccan people could express their aspiration to educate their children in modern schools in the hope that this would provide access to a government job or a modern profession. The religious aspect of teaching became secondary.

As a result, *kuttabs*, which were traditionally attended by children between four and ten years old, and even sometimes teenagers[14], gradually began to enroll more pre-school children. This reflected parents' decision to send their children to *kuttabs* at increasingly younger ages in order to prepare them for public schools, which accepted them from seven years of age. Children above pre-school age only attended the *kuttabs* when they were unable to go to a modern school because of distance, poverty or learning difficulties. This was especially the case in rural areas.

These facts gradually changed the status of the *kuttab* and gave it a new role. The *kuttab* increasingly specialised in pre-school education. The way in which this 'pre-school institution' came into being – namely out of the social need to provide care to young children rather than through planning or a deliberate pre-school education programme at national level – reflects the lack of attention given to this sector in the country. In contrast to other Maghreb countries, it is surprising to note that in Morocco, pre-schools or pre-school classes were never integrated into the public education system. From the outset, the Ministry of National Education's efforts were exclusively devoted to primary education. Early childhood education, whether through 'modern' pre-schools or *kuttabs*, was left to private initiative.

Nonetheless, the authorities sought to put some legitimacy and order into a *de facto* situation largely created by circumstances. This is how we interpreted the goal and message of the 'Koranic Schools Operation' launched by a royal speech on 9 October 1968. This speech is the only text that has legal status in the early childhood sector, and it explicitly defines the *kuttab* as a pre-school institution and spells out its expected functions. Oscillating between tradition and modernity, the speech calls on the *kuttab* to take on several functions and to respond to various needs. Its main function of safeguarding children's identity through teaching the Koran and the basic precepts of Islam, is preserved. This function is considered all the more urgent as a growing number of working mothers was no longer in a position to guarantee cultural continuity. The *kuttab* was seen as the only institution that could fill this gap and respond to a social need.

But the royal speech also introduced an entirely new notion in the recent history of Moroccan *kuttabs:* their responsibility, besides religious education, was to prepare children for primary school. This was to be done through a series of academic activities that included basic literacy and numeracy, singing and sports. Nonetheless, most activities in the *kuttab* were still oriented at developing children's memory: an asset viewed as indispensable for all future learning or cultural acquisition.

By taking some of the responsibility for preparing children for entry into public primary school, the *kuttab* took some of the financial burden of pre-schools off the Ministry of National Education. The public savings linked to the *kuttab* system are obvious.

Institutionalisation was the other key notion in the royal speech. A whole stage of the child's life, until now taken care of informally by the family or the community, was to become the object of institutionalised education through the *kuttab*. *Kuttab* headmasters received pedagogical guidance (curricula and text books) from the Ministry of Primary Education, and

14 The majority of children left the *kuttab* around the age of nine or ten to work as apprentices to craftsmen in the city or, in rural areas, to help in the fields. Some stayed on until adolescence, generally because their parents wanted them to become teachers in the *kuttab*. Furthermore, given the limited practice of official census, parents were the ones who decided at what age children would enter or leave the *kuttab*. See Radia (1970) *Processus de socialisation de l'enfant marocain. Annales de sociologie marocaine*. Rabat.

the *kuttab* thus became the compulsory first step for children to enter primary school. In the 1970s and 1980s, children in urban areas even had to prove they had attended a *kuttab* in order to be admitted into primary school. This practice, which was not part of the law, seems to have been disbanded.

To support this operation, a wide reaching awareness campaign targeting pre-school advisers (former primary school teachers recruited for this task) and later at teachers was launched. This campaign was supported by UNICEF from 1974 onwards.[15] The results of this operation can be observed in most urban *kuttabs*, and even those in small towns. For example, some features of modern schooling have been introduced: desks, chairs and a blackboard have replaced mats and wooden boards; and when possible students now have chalk boards, textbooks and notebooks. On top of this two levels of pre-school were established. The Koran is no longer the exclusive teaching resource and children also learn the alphabet, reading and maths; and the Ministry distributes a timetable divided by subject. In short, the *kuttab* has become 'a primary school' in its most basic form.

15. Ben El Azmia A (1989) *La situation de l'Ecole Coranique au Maroc*, evaluation of the renovation programme in light of the actions undertaken in collaboration with the Ministry of National Education and UNICEF. (UNICEF document)

The current situation of *kuttabs*

Currently, some 800,000 children are enrolled in Koranic schools. A table tracing the evolution in the number of children, institutions and teachers gives an idea of the scale.[16]

16. Statistical Division of the Ministry of National Education, Rabat, Morocco.

	1969-70	1975-76	1980-81	1985-86	1990-91	1994-95
Kuttabs	14,283	18,932	27,245	29,901	33,345	36,117
Children	293,612	375,567	583,868	693,738	778,766	787,681
Teachers	14,333	20,576	29,366	31,811	38,247	37,834

This table shows a steady growth in the number of *kuttabs*, children and teachers during the period. About one third of all children in the three to six year old age group attend pre-school, and they form about 88 per cent of pre-school children in Morocco. The remaining children attend modern pre-schools based on the Western model. Given the difficulty in determining whether a school belongs to the modern or traditional sector, these statistics are approximations. It is even difficult to keep an official count, given the informal character of pre-school education in general (some institutions open their doors without obtaining authorisation).

The conditions in *kuttabs* are often precarious, and there is a significant difference between those in urban and those in rural areas. In urban areas for example, 24 per cent have no desks and 15 per cent no electricity, while in rural areas these figures jump to 82 and 83 per cent respectively[17]. This indicates the predominance of traditional *kuttabs* in rural areas.

In about 75 per cent of urban *kuttabs*, children are either crowded into so called institutions that often have no more than one classroom, or else into stalls or garages not meant for educational purposes. In theory there are only 34 students per classroom but in reality, up to 50 children can be cramped into a 12 m2 space. We have counted up to six children per square meter in some cases. Cramped on benches behind their desks, facing an imagined blackboard in semi-darkness, they are unable to move about and fulfill their need for play. Nor is there any playground. In the best of cases, this 'institution' will only have one bathroom with running water. When a *kuttab* has several rooms, it may be located in a one-floor apartment initially designed as living space. In working class neighbourhoods, they are often located on the ground floor. In general, the *kuttab* is a reflection of the environment in which it is situated.

In rural areas, where 82 per cent of all children attending a *kuttab* live, the average number of children per room is lower at 16 or 17. These children generally sit on mats placed on the ground around the *fqih*[18] and learn the Koran on their wooden boards. Boys make up 82 percent of the school population as in rural areas girls rarely attend *kuttabs*, while in the city, girls represent 45 percent of enrolments. There are rarely toilets and running water.

Whether in urban or rural areas, the staff working with these children generally has no specific teacher training. In rural areas, the *fqih* model is the most common. The *fqih* knows the Koran by heart and has a contract with the community to fulfill a certain number of religious activities, including teaching the Koran to children, in return for being cared for by the community. In cities, the requirement to supplement the teaching of the Koran with other activities has been better put into practice.

In many cases – and as spelt out in the Ministry's directives – the traditional *fqih* has been obliged to recruit young women with at least a primary school certificate and a few years of secondary school to care for increasingly younger children and 'teach' them new activities. These 'occasional teachers' often have meagre salaries and highly unstable employment. In some cases, *kuttab* owners have even refused to let them follow practical training courses

17. All these statistics are extracted from data of the Division of Statistics, Ministry of National Education, Rabat, Morocco

18. *Fqih* is a Koranic school teacher

organised by the Ministry for fear that they would leave for a better paid position. Nevertheless, even if, unlike their male counterparts, their status is not recognised, these young women have changed the image of *kuttabs*. A paternal institution once exclusively managed by men is gradually becoming a maternal institution, even if the official ratio of female staff is no more than 25 percent. Alongside this, young men and women with higher education or even university training have been able to start up pre-schools with very limited resources and have managed to earn a living. Still, regardless of the educator's training, there is a tendency to teach reading and numeracy in an artificial and excessively abstract way.

The pre-school sector in Morocco is quasi-informal. It is not centrally controlled, nor does it have clearly stated goals. The sector is in the hands of private individuals and at least in cities, tends to be more concerned with profit and competition than imparting values attuned to children's needs. Whether in pre-schools or *kuttabs*, early childhood education in Morocco is not part of the public school system. The State, given its limited resources, does not seem prepared to integrate it, and yet it does try to provide it with some guidance. In some ways, the action-research project that we are carrying out in partnership with the Ministry of National Education can fit into this framework.

The ATFALE Project

This is the general situation of early childhood education within which the ATFALE team has been working since 1990. As psychologists and pedagogists, we were convinced that the methods used in *kuttabs* were inadequate for pre-school children. We were also convinced that children's first years, especially the pre-school years, are of critical importance for further development and achievement. These were all relatively basic convictions that could easily be shared with our partners in the Ministry of National Education. The difficulty was to translate these convictions into practices that would have an impact in the field. This required defining principles that would serve as a philosophy or common platform for both our teams and our partners in the Ministry. It also meant developing an effective action methodology to achieve our goals.

From the outset the ATFALE project, an extension of the project piloted under the Ministry of Youth and Sports, had theoretical and practical ambitions. Its objectives, as summarised on the basis of a questionnaire drawn up by our team and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, were:

- to develop a child centred concept of pre-school education;
- to support new approaches for the re-training of teachers in the pre-school field, aiming to improve their attitudes and skills so as to respect the child's needs and the socio-economic and cultural environment;
- to develop methods likely to make teachers more sensitive to the necessity of involving all partners in the educational process, particularly parents and communities;
- to develop a training methodology that creates a dynamic process for the teacher to integrate innovative and adequate educational practices;
- to stimulate and create more dynamic training facilities in ministries and other organisations involved in the development of young children.

We felt it was important to include this official formulation of the ATFALE project's objectives in this paper since it expresses the scope and complexity of the project, as well as the different groups it seeks to reach.

In order to reach these objectives, the ATFALE team proposed an action-research strategy. From the outset, we sought to involve the GKPS team in the project's development and implementation.

This strategy drew on the evaluation of the experience conducted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, by developing its positive aspects and correcting the negative ones. This experience essentially underlined the need for the relative autonomy (especially financial) of the two partners and as precise a definition as possible of each party's roles and responsibilities. We were able to appreciate the value of some of the features such as the 'resource centres' that were set up as part of this first project. These will be discussed at greater length later in this paper.

Methodology of engaged action-research

Our decision to launch an action-research process was based on our admittedly incomplete knowledge of the pre-school sector. Our aim was to contribute to improving the learning conditions of children, and to enhance our psycho-social understanding of early childhood development so as to adapt intervention models.

Our action-research[19] was founded on a number of basic premises, namely: the need to involve various actors at all levels who were interested in the project and encourage their participation (ministerial decision-makers, administrative managers, teachers and parents); the need for ongoing articulation between theory and practice, and its continuous evaluation during the process in order to progressively monitor and adjust the project.

Rather than providing us with a definite understanding of the situation of pre-schools, this method enabled us to gradually understand the multi-faceted dimensions of early childhood development which would help us understand various situations and guide our action. Khaled El Andaloussi, Director of the ATFALE project, discusses the status of the action-research knowledge in the following way: 'The change in discourse away from a systematic, homogeneous and total knowledge has upset the power of this knowledge. It has been replaced by a set of meanings given by those participating in the research, both researchers and actors.'[20]

These fundamental principles were the basis for developing the action-research strategy and an operational framework that have proved their effectiveness over the years. The strategy includes the modalities chosen for introducing innovation into Koranic pre-schools; and the framework relates to the rules and operating guidelines followed by the teams responsible for implementing the action-research. We will first present the operational framework, since it influences the whole process.

The operational framework of the ATFALE and GKPS teams

To determine how our two teams would work together, ATFALE and GKPS drew up agreements in close cooperation. We formed a contract to which both sides had to abide. Jointly developing the agreements was a first step in involving all participants; a notion to which we

19. For a more in-depth approach to the methodological basis of action-research, see El Andaloussi K. (1995) *Developpement de la recherche-action et contribution à l'innovation de l'éducation préscolaire au Maroc*, doctorate thesis in psycho-pedagogical sciences, University of Mons, Hainaut, France.

20. El Andaloussi K. (1995) *Developpement de la recherche-action et contribution à l'innovation de l'éducation préscolaire au Maroc*, doctorate thesis in psycho-pedagogical sciences, University of Mons, Hainaut, France.

attach top importance. These agreements defined the bodies responsible for the project, their composition, contributions and roles. Finally, an operating structure for coordinating the two teams was defined. It included the following.

- **Supervision meetings.**
  These involved the Dean of the Faculty of Education Sciences, and the Director of Primary Education – the supervisors of ATEALE and GKPS – and the members of the two teams in order to evaluate the project's progress and to facilitate various administrative measures. At least one meeting had to be held every two months, and these meetings were most frequent at the beginning of the project.

- **Coordination meetings.**
  These gathered the two teams once or twice a week in order to conceive, plan and organise the action-research process based on the continuous evaluation of activities undertaken. The tradition of holding these meetings was maintained throughout the project.

- **Pedagogical meetings.**
  Members from both teams met with resource people who contributed their expertise on various subjects such as music, maths, religious education, popular tales, and science in developing and producing documents and pedagogical materials.

The agreements also stated that both ATEALE and GKPS should both set up their own internal operating structure, such as weekly meetings, to facilitate work and to improve cooperation with partners.

The ATEALE team faithfully held weekly report meetings throughout the duration of the project. These meetings took on a somewhat ritual character, involving the exchange of information, discussions on actions underway and ongoing events, as well as programming and the assigning of tasks. The lack of a permanent space meant that GKPS did not always have the chance to hold regular report meetings.

ATEALE's regular meetings had a history of their own which the team was only able to share to a limited extent with GKPS. Team members could call these meetings to resolve a conflict or a problem experienced with another colleague. But since the rules and regularity of the meetings were never clearly spelt out during the pilot project with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, they became the stage for some heated emotional clashes. Instead of resolving conflicts, many turned into traumatic sessions. Perhaps we lacked an outside view that would have helped to resolve problems. As a result, these meetings were abolished in the current project.

Conflicts, which are often tied to questions of power and individual recognition within a team, have also been handled in other ways. Although dealing with conflict has been difficult to manage, we have increasingly learnt to deal with it. Gradually, through working together on a daily basis for over ten years, the group has become wiser and considers conflict as an integral part of the team work that strongly involves each one of us. Proof of this maturity is that we come across as a solid and harmonious team to all outside partners.

The strategy for introducing innovation into Koranic pre-schools

This strategy includes organisational and pedagogical aspects. We were convinced that in order to change the way teachers worked it was not enough to simply spread new knowledge

and innovative approaches about the psychology and learning skills of pre-school children. Instead, they had to be supported by structures that made these approaches and skills concrete, while also winning the approval of decision-makers.

Over a period of four years, we worked with seven delegations from the Ministry of National Education, following a programme and clearly defined steps. The first year solely involved preparation and working with a delegation from Rabat. In order to start the preparation, a regional delegation from the Ministry of National Education had to be involved in the process of action-research. A local team to implement the project could then be identified, comprising educational advisers from the delegation, and a proportionate number of teachers chosen by these advisers. In total, each team consisted of between 20 and 35 people according to the importance of the delegation forming the local team. The delegation allocated a resource centre comprising one or two equipped classrooms in a primary school to the project. The ATFALE and GKPS teams and the local team choose the space together, taking into account its material conditions and accessibility for the majority of teachers.

This framework was established before the first 'internal training' session began in February. The two local teams were invited to Rabat to follow the course. The first session lasted two weeks and was held in a teacher training centre – an indirect way of underlining that Koranic pre-schools were part of the official system. After this, the teachers returned to their respective *kuttabs* but committed themselves to meeting once a week at the resource centre with the advisers and members of the ATFALE and GKPS teams. The resource centres were set up by the local teams to put their training into practice, for example on subjects such as organising learning 'corners', or presenting the learning materials that they had produced. Meeting at the resource centre had several goals: to enable the exchange of experience between teachers; to consolidate their training; and to make low-cost educational games and toys.

This cycle of training, returning to the field and meeting at the resource centres was repeated twice in the year. Each time, the training became more attuned to the teachers' needs – a result of the process itself. The ATFALE and GKPS teams were able to enrich their field knowledge by visiting all the *kuttabs* involved in the project at the beginning and end of the training year.

By the end of the initial year, the local team had forged its identity as a pilot group. Its task was now to share its knowledge, according to a set plan, with teachers who were not directly

reached by the project. This required holding regular meetings at the resource centres, which became the vital springboard for spreading innovative practices. Advisers also organised regular visits for teachers from *kuttab*s to observe new teaching and learning techniques.

On the pedagogical level, we had to take into account several factors such as the very basic conditions and the lack of specific training on the part of teachers and advisers. Within this context, we tried to adapt pedagogical approaches in the pre-school education framework that respected universally recognised objectives to our situation.

These approaches rest on a number of key notions: starting with the child; working in small activity groups; organising the *kuttab* classroom into free activity corners; introducing progression and continuity between the various activities; encouraging the child to play and move about the learning space; developing educational activities related to health; using the environment as a learning medium; and, involving parents as much as possible in the life of the *kuttab*.

These ideas became a credo which guided ATFALE and GKPS in all our pedagogical interventions. To be put into practice, each component of these approaches had to be negotiated with learning advisers and teachers. These approaches take into account pedagogical considerations, but more importantly, the reality of the *kuttab*s. For instance, in situations where there are a large number of children in a small space nearly entirely occupied by benches and desks, teachers learned how to work in small groups and set up free activity corners.

Training sessions were never held in lecture style but were animated and had a strong input from advisers and teachers, and always included time for making learning materials. This was not only very appreciated but also encouraged a change in mainstream attitudes towards learning.

At the end of each training session, teachers had to write a personal report, giving a realistic outline of the changes they planned to introduce into their respective *kuttab*s, both with regard to classroom organisation and to activities. Advisers meanwhile started to reflect on ways to spread their project to teachers not directly involved in the action-research.

Evolution of the action-research

The 'research-training' strategy presented above was applied from the first year. The main steps and ways of conducting internal and field training remained the same thereafter, although the way that training was conceived evolved over the period.

During the first two years, the training emphasised the importance of organising the classroom space and introducing new activities in the *kuttab*. These activities could complement previous ones and each teacher was encouraged to find a suitable balance between the old and the new, according to their *kuttab*'s specific needs and constraints. There was never a question of imposing one single learning methodology. As our action-research advanced, the need for teachers to have their own 'pedagogical project' that streamlined all their activities in a particular direction became more obvious. The basic elements of our learning methodology – to start from the child, to organise the classroom space and so on – were naturally integrated into the project and became the means to achieve it. Also, as the years went by, we met with much less resistance to change from teachers and advisers.

The ideas which we advocated appeared to spread quickly and smoothly from Rabat to the other delegations, not only through the training and research, but also through two international meetings, open to a large public, at the Faculty of Education Sciences.[21] In addition, we advocated our ideas to a modest degree through a media campaign in the press and on the radio.

Teachers and advisers called for more campaigns of this style: not only did they legitimise the project, they also reassured parents by convincing them that these pedagogical innovations were well founded. Parents sometimes expressed reluctance at 'paying for their children to play in the *kuttab*'. They looked for an immediate return on their investment such as seeing their children write a few letters of the alphabet and recite Surats from the Koran. They constituted an important body of resistance to the innovation. The rallying of parents to the project implied a change in attitude towards the image of the child, and a realisation of the particular needs of very young children.

All these observations lead back to the systematic nature of our action-research, whereby each factor influences the other. We needed to work at a micro social level with defined groups to enable them to acquire, through the process of action-research, training and skills; and we needed to work at the macro social level, in order to spread these practices and give them legitimacy.

After five years of targeted action, the macro social level is proving to be increasingly important. We plan to put special emphasis on this when the programme goes to scale. But first, let us examine the results of the first phase of action-research (1990-1994).

The impact on pedagogical activities

Requiring teachers to develop their own pedagogical project at each stage of the training year, and providing assistance in this task, encouraged them to put commitments into practice within the context of their respective *kuttabs*. As a result, a large variety of new teaching activities in *kuttabs* appeared. Excursions such as to the nearest market, the health unit, or the carpenter's workshop, often broke the previous routine. Setting up activity corners where children participated by bringing recycled materials also mobilised teachers, children and parents. The 'food store,' 'dolls' and 'health' were among the most popular and most frequently found corners. One corner however deserves particular attention: the 'Islamic education corner'.

How the realm of Islamic education was dealt with is key to the project's evolution. Teachers and, in particular, advisers had to be convinced that the project did not call into question this fundamental component of the *kuttab*'s identity and did not hinder the needs of pre-school children. Our intention was to maintain the content and methods of Islamic education and simply add new activities to the curriculum. Gradually, teachers and advisers themselves came up with suggestions in this area, and a 'Mosque Corner' started to appear in *kuttabs*. It reproduced the layout of a mosque, featured pictures of Mecca, a prayer mat, the Koran, and the different stages of prayer and ablutions. The latter pictures were important both for the purposes of religious education as well as for acquiring basic knowledge of hygiene and of human physiology.

21. ATFALE (1992) *Actes du premier colloque Maghrebin sur l'éducation préscolaire*. Faculty of Education Sciences. Mohammed V University. Rabat.
ATFALE (1994). *Actes des journées internationales audio-visuelles sur l'éducation préscolaire*. Faculté des Sciences de l'Education. Mohammed V University. Rabat.

Working in small groups, which we linked to the organisation of classroom space, turned out to be difficult in many cases given the size of the premises, and the fact that most of the space was often taken up by a large number of desks. Nevertheless, a number of teachers took the initiative to move the desks around and place them opposite one another, even if it was just once or twice a week. This innovation was appreciated because it improved the interaction with the children. Instead of facing the whole classroom, teachers could develop a closer relationship with each child while also enriching interaction among the children.

Teachers and advisers also competed with each other in creativity to produce educational games and materials – especially games for learning how to read and materials to enliven the various activity corners. We lack the space here to describe the changes introduced by the action-research, in which participants enjoyed the freedom to express their creativity.

But we could not close this chapter without referring to the evaluation study conducted by Faiq[22] in 1995 on how local teams, in the year following their training, spread the project to teachers. This study was carried out on a representative sample of the delegations with which we worked.

22. Faiq M (1995) *Etude evaluative de la phase de diffusion du Projet Koranic Pre-schools*, Ministry of National Education, Directorate of Pre-school Education/AIPALE

We found that the best indicators of the extent to which *kuttab* teachers were influenced through on-the-job training at the Resource Centres and exchange visits, were changes in their teaching techniques and classroom organisation. For change to happen, it is necessary for local teams to be able to introduce new teaching techniques in their own *kuttabs* in order to be able to communicate them effectively to other teachers.

The study showed the resource centres and local teams to be effective operational structures for spreading new practices, and they became local centres of information exchange and teacher training. These exchanges led to a feeling of solidarity among teachers that replaced to some extent the traditionally competitive spirit that prevailed. New skills, especially in making low-cost learning materials, were acquired, and an estimated 30 to 70 per cent of the *kuttabs* introduced manual and artistic activities, psychomotricity, popular tales, work in small groups, excursions and the use of activity corners. No *kuttab* reached by the project shunned the new practices. Some other *kuttabs* not reached directly by the project even developed their own practices as if to show that they identified with a certain image of modernity.

Impact at the institutional and administrative levels

The setting up of an administrative ministerial body in charge of the pre-school sector reflects the importance given by Government to this sector; though it would take a while before the pre-school sector would find its niche. Following the Koranic School Operation established earlier, an Office for Pre-school Education was created within each Delegation. This initiative was extended in 1972 by the creation of a Central Office in the Ministry and from 1975, the pre-school sector fell under the Division that was in charge of addressing illiteracy. But this Division did not survive, and from the 1980s, the pre-school sector was managed by the Service for Control and Learning Support. This shuffling underlines the difficulty of giving pre-school education a defined position in the Ministry of National Education's portfolio.

In 1994, partly as a result of the dynamism fostered in pre-school education by our action-research – in which the Ministry was directly involved – a Directorate for Pre-schools and the First Cycle of Basic Education was created. This is of key importance as it is a recognition that education problems in Morocco are rooted in the period before primary school. By creating the Directorate, the Ministry demonstrated the necessity to develop links between pre-schools and primary schools. This in turn required a review of traditional *kuttabs* in order for them to merit the status of a pre-school institution. This Directorate in 1996 committed itself to spreading our innovative approaches and pedagogical concepts throughout the country's delegations. To this end, a more complex strategy involving partners from different ministries and international organisations (like the UNDP and the World Bank) has to be developed. It also means finding solutions to the problem of pre-schools in rural areas – one of the main challenges for new action-research.

The interest in the pre-school sector has raised questions regarding the status and training of pre-school teachers, health standards, space requirements for a *kuttab*, and the status of pre-school advisers. The drafting of legal texts governing these aspects has become indispensable in formalising and bringing some homogeneity to a somewhat disorganised educational sector. The Ministry has started to work on these and a draft law was presented to Parliament on the subject. Our action-research team was asked to contribute to it in the light of its knowledge of the field and pedagogical competence.

Conclusions

The action-research initiated by the AFEALE team from 1990 with its partners in the Ministry led to the singling out of a number of elements, even though incomplete, which provided us with an understanding of the many complex roles and functions of Koranic schools, an institution in the midst of deep-seated transformation. The fact that we participated as researchers and actors in this transformation process helped us to better identify areas of resistance to change and to promote knowledge that is liable to contribute directly to improving the situation.

We certainly do not pretend that the various transformations in educational practice and the *kuttabs*' current status are solely linked to the 'ingenuity' of our action-research strategy. A more detached view suggests that action-research is an integral component of an inevitable process of evolution in socialisation and education patterns in our country. These in turn are linked to the overall evolution of society.

We can consider the impact of our action-research on *kuttabs* as the final stage of the passage from an institution exclusively devoted to religious socialisation, to one that partially responds to the need for child care (since many mothers have started to work).

The *kuttab* institution is working towards setting itself pedagogical objectives adapted to young children and to being integrated into the socio-cultural environment. In a previous stage, *kuttabs* had tried unsuccessfully to copy learning techniques used in the first grade of elementary school.

At present, Morocco has three types of early childhood institutions: modern pre-schools; pre-school *kuttabs*; and traditional *kuttabs*, with the traditional *kuttabs* predominating in rural areas and pre-schools in cities. The limitations of rural *kuttabs* are becoming increasingly apparent, both in regard to the demands they place on the children and their somewhat outdated character. This explains the welcome our innovative proposals received from decision makers and teachers.

We have explained why decision-makers rallied to our action-research. With regards to teachers, the younger teachers or those who own their *kuttab* more or less perceive the anachronistic character of their former practices, and they are worried about being too distanced from modern pre-schools, their immediate competitors. Their challenge is to put themselves across as carriers of 'real' Moroccan and Muslim values and to show themselves capable of handling the 'modern' pedagogical proposals that we offer.

Educational advisers seem to occupy the most difficult position in the process. Having played a role in introducing a school-type pedagogy in the *kuttabs* as part of their initial re-training, and as former primary school teachers themselves, they are now being asked to change their conception of teaching and learning in favour of methods that give children more initiative and freedom. Without adequate preparation, they are asked to train and support teachers in a different direction. Reflecting upon the best profile of the educational adviser is a key challenge for the success of current and future action-research. In contrast to teachers who belong to the private sector, the advisers – of which there are currently 491 – are employed by the Ministry. As such, they are the only ones who can ensure, in a sustained manner, the transmission and spread of any new pedagogical directions adopted by the Ministry.

All these various actors perceive the evolution of Koranic schools as inevitable, and they are looking for references to guide this evolution. Our action-research work came at the right time, as if to answer this need and help find a solution.

Current expectations of *kuttabs* are very different from what they were a few decades ago. The exclusively religious socialisation that these institutions provided is no longer enough. Society seems to expect *kuttabs* to play a transitional role between the family environment, which is often illiterate, and the school environment, a symbol of literacy and science.

Increasingly, parents take their children to the *kuttab* in order to prepare them for primary school. Enrolling their children in the *kuttab*, especially in cities, is part of modern schooling, but the history of this institution, its expectations and social and cultural roots, its proximity and modest fees give it a specific place in society that modern pre-schools do not have. More than anywhere else, the contradictory and multiple aspirations of parents and of society in general to join the modern age while preserving traditional values is expressed through the *kuttab*. This transitional position makes this institution ready to welcome and adapt itself towards modernisation while affirming its identity and roots in the past. To organise this transition from a research perspective which gives beneficiaries the power to influence and choose the changes they wish is the ethical base underpinning our action-research.

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